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Bell Laboratories

600 Mountain Avenue
Murray Hill, New Jersey 07974
Phone (201) 582-3000

May 11, 1978

x Jansky.

Professor Joshua Lederberg
Department of Genetics
School of Medicine
Stanford University
Stanford, California 94305

Dear Professor Lederberg:

I was glad to get your communication about Karl Jansky, and I think I can give you an authoritative answer to your question.

It is clear to me, from our records which include transcripts of interviews and letters from his co-workers (A. M. Skellet, Ralph Bown, G. C. Southworth, H. T. Friis, A. C. Beck, J. C. Schelling, A. B. Crawford) and Karl's brother, C. M. Jansky, that the views as expressed by Harald T. Friis in the attached paper from Science, August 20, 1965 are correct. Friis was the Director of Radio Research at Bell Laboratories and was quite close to Jansky throughout the latter's career.

Fagen, M.D.

The answer to the question "Why was the work dropped?" is not that "he was told to turn his attention elsewhere." He had found the source of the observed noise and published several papers on his discovery (see Friis' article). He had satisfied himself and had reached the limits of what he could do, he was ready to continue his static and noise studies of which the galactic noise had been only a part. You will see that he did carry on a 1934 experiment at a wavelength of 4 meters but the results were negative; however, he did confirm his earlier results by experiments in 1935. In 1938 he dropped the study.

Friis says that Karl was free to continue the work on galactic noise if he had wanted to. However, there was no indication of interest from the astronomers at the time so there was no impetus to look into new technology to advance the art of antennas and sensitive receivers to meet the needs of radio astronomy. It was natural, then, that Jansky should continue his general studies in noise and interference, expanding his investigations on the angle of arrival of transatlantic radio waves and other aspects of radio propagation.

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As to the extent of recognition of Jansky's work, there is reference in Friis' paper to a New York Times front-page story shortly after the 1933 announcements. I am enclosing a copy. Friis says, "Karl was now a famous man."

You are correct about the absence of honors and awards in the early years. However, he was a Fellow of the Institute of Radio Engineers. As you may know, the Laboratory of the National Radio Astronomy Observatory in West Virginia is named the "Karl Guthe Jansky Laboratory" (built in 1959).

I hope the above information will help. The source is very reliable and first-hand. I think the Edge-Mulkay statement is based on something in a book by John Pfeiffer, The Changing Universe. I trust Harald Friis and his other co-workers who were there and in daily contact with the man.

Let me know if you need anything more.

Yours truly,


M. D. Fagen
Consultant

Att: Copy of
"Karl Jansky: His Career
at Bell Telephone Laboratories"
"New Radio Waves Traced to
Centre of the Milky Way"
"Search for Life ..."